

# Human Trafficking and Child Welfare: A Guide for Caseworkers

Child welfare caseworkers can be an invaluable resource in helping communities prevent and respond to the human trafficking of children and youth. Young people involved with child welfare are vulnerable to trafficking because of their potentially unstable living situations, disconnection from friends and family, traumatic experiences, and emotional vulnerability. Therefore, child welfare caseworkers must be at the forefront of efforts to identify, respond to, and prevent human trafficking.

This bulletin explores how caseworkers can identify and support children and youth who have been victimized as well as those with risk factors for future victimization. It provides background information about trafficking, strategies caseworkers can use to identify and support victims and potential victims, and links to tools and resources that can assist caseworkers.

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Child Welfare Information Gateway developed [Human Trafficking and Child Welfare: A Guide for Child Welfare Agencies](#) as a companion guide to this publication to assist child welfare agencies in addressing human trafficking.

## BACKGROUND

Although human trafficking is by no means a new issue, in recent years, public agencies have greatly strengthened their focus on its prevention, identification, and response, as well as treatment for those who have experienced trafficking. The following section provides information on the scope of the problem and its connections with child welfare.

### Definitions and Terminology

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (P.L. 106–386), as amended, defines “severe forms of trafficking in persons” as the following:

- **Labor trafficking** is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery.
- **Sex trafficking** is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act when a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion. Of note, while adults must be compelled to perform commercial sex by force, fraud, or coercion for it to be considered a severe form of trafficking in persons, this is not the case for children. By law, children under the age of 18 who are induced to engage in a commercial sex act or to exchange sex for anything of value, including food or a place to stay, are considered victims of sex trafficking.

For more information about how States classify human trafficking, see Information Gateway’s [Definitions of Human Trafficking](#).

Professionals in child welfare and related areas have used “victims” or “survivors” to refer to individuals who have experienced human trafficking. Although the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, this bulletin uses the term “victim” while still acknowledging the strength and resiliency of those who have experienced trafficking. We also use “child [and/or youth] who has experienced trafficking.” Caseworkers should also consider how a person who has experienced trafficking wishes to identify and use their preferred terms or pronouns or offer them a choice.

## **Myth vs. Reality**

**Myth:** Trafficking always involves transporting people across State, county, or other borders.

**Reality:** Human trafficking is sometimes confused with human smuggling, which involves illegal border crossings. Human trafficking does not require any movement, and victims can be recruited and trafficked in rural areas, cities, and even in their homes (Polaris Project, n.d.). Smugglers may bring people across a border of sex or labor trafficking, but smuggling alone is not trafficking.

## **SCOPE OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

The exact number of children and youth who have experienced human trafficking in the United States is unknown, and determining the number is difficult. The number varies widely from source to source, often due to differences in definitions and methodologies (Finklea et al., 2015). Challenges to data collection include the following:

- Lack of screening mechanisms to identify victims, which leads to underreporting if trafficking is identified but reported as child abuse or sexual abuse
- Lack of services available after disclosure, which may lead to underreporting
- Victims potentially not being identified if they talk to a professional who lacks a trauma-informed approach or if they fear talking to authorities, distrust service providers, or have been coached by their traffickers on what to say

While existing national data are not reliable indicators of the prevalence of human trafficking, and most service providers believe that available statistics underestimate the scope of the problem, there are various studies and organizations that provide a glimpse at how many children may be experiencing human trafficking:

- The [National Human Trafficking Hotline](#) (2023) received reports for 10,360 potential cases of human trafficking in 2021, with minors being identified as the victims in 13 percent of labor trafficking cases and 28 percent of sex trafficking cases.
- In 2021, an estimated one in six of the more than 25,000 children reported to the [National Center for Missing and Exploited Children](#) (NCMEC) as missing had experienced sex trafficking (NCMEC, 2021a).
- In fiscal year 2021, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) certified that 1,200 foreign national minors had experienced trafficking and were eligible for victims services. Of those, 25 percent had experienced sex trafficking, and 68 percent had experienced labor trafficking (U.S. Department of State, 2022).

Children and youth who experience human trafficking are diverse and include all races and ethnicities, socioeconomic statuses, sexual orientations, and gender identities (Gibbs, Feinberg, et al., 2018). While females are often identified as more likely to experience trafficking, this could reflect limited recognition of males and other gender identities as victims (National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center, 2021). One research review concluded that demographic characteristics are not independent risk factors for trafficking (Choi, 2015). Foreign nationals of all genders more often experience labor trafficking than sex trafficking (U.S. Department of State, 2022).

### **Myth vs. Reality**

**Myth:** Only girls can experience child sex trafficking.

**Reality:** Anyone can experience sex trafficking. However, youth who identify as LGBTQIA2S+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, intersex, asexual, Two-Spirit, or other gender or sexual identity) may be particularly vulnerable (Polaris Project, n.d.).

## **INTERSECTION OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND CHILD WELFARE**

Children in out-of-home care are particularly vulnerable to trafficking. Estimating the number of trafficking victims who are or were involved with child welfare is equally as challenging as determining the overall number of victims. Still, several studies have shown a strong connection. For example, in 2021, of the children reported to NCMEC as missing from care, an estimated 19 percent experienced sex trafficking (NCMEC, 2021a).

A background of abuse and trauma—coupled with the impermanence of foster care or congregate care—makes children in out-of-home care especially vulnerable to trafficking. Research has found links between experiencing out-of-home placements and/or sexual abuse and an increased vulnerability to human trafficking (Gibbs, Henninger et al., 2018; Reid et al., 2017).

Traffickers may specifically focus on children in (or have run away from) foster care because of their increased vulnerability and work to exploit the fact that these children may not have their familial, emotional, or basic needs met (Amaya et al., 2021). Traffickers may promise to meet those needs—at times employing psychological manipulation and financial incentives—and then use persuasion, violence, drugs, or physical control to retain and exploit them. It is important to acknowledge the grooming that occurs as predators work to create emotional bonds with the child or youth under their control. Past or current sexual abuse can make children and youth particularly vulnerable to abuse by traffickers and predators, as abuse may normalize certain sexual behaviors. Children who have experienced multiple out-of-home placements may also have increased vulnerability if they develop an understanding that they play a role in making money for others (e.g., through foster care payments).

## **Myth vs. Reality**

**Myth:** Child welfare caseworkers cannot serve victims of human trafficking because their needs are too complex due to the trauma they have endured.

**Reality:** While some of their needs require an individualized approach, children and youth who are victims of trafficking need many of the same supports that caseworkers are trained to provide all young people who have experienced trauma.

Caseworkers who use trauma-informed practice with their clients will find that this approach will support children and youth who have experienced trafficking. Such practice typically includes the following (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014):

- Realizing the impact of trauma
- Recognizing the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients
- Responding by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practice
- Resisting the retraumatization of children and the adults who care for them

Behavioral health practices being used to address other kinds of trauma may be considered for those who have experienced trafficking. This includes trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy, an evidence-based treatment approach shown to help children and youth overcome trauma-related difficulties. Other promising new treatments being explored for use with patients who have experienced trauma include expressive arts therapy, trauma-informed mindfulness, animal-assisted therapy, equine therapy, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, and dialectical behavior therapy. For more information, see Information Gateway's [The Importance of a Trauma-Informed Child Welfare System](#) and [Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy: A Primer for Child Welfare Professionals](#).

## **Myth vs. Reality**

**Myth:** Human trafficking is always a violent crime.

**Reality:** One of the most pervasive myths about human trafficking is that it involves kidnapping or physically forcing someone into the situation. In reality, traffickers often build relationships with those they are trying to exploit, using money and gifts or psychological avenues—such as manipulation, threats, trickery, or fraud—to lure their victims into trafficking situations (Polaris Project, 2020; Polaris Project, n.d.).

## RISK FACTORS

Although there is not a comprehensive set of characteristics that define who will be a victim of human trafficking, there are factors that increase a child's or youth's risk (Amaya et al., 2021; Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative, 2016; Family and Youth Services Bureau [FYSB], 2016; Greenbaum et al., 2015):

- History of maltreatment at home
- History of sexual abuse
- Involvement with the child welfare or juvenile justice systems
- History of running away
- Housing insecurity
- Financial insecurity
- Disconnection from family, peers, or community supports
- Personal or family history of substance use or mental health disorders
- Identification as LGBTQIA2S+
- Unmet intangible or emotional needs (e.g., love, belonging, affection, protection)
- Low self-esteem
- Lack of personal identity

These risk factors are not exhaustive, and experiencing one or more does not mean a child or youth will experience trafficking. A person may be victimized without association with any of these risk factors. If your agency does not require screening for trafficking in all cases, you can use these risk factors as an informal way of assessing risk and determining if additional screening or assessment is necessary.

### ***Myth vs. Reality***

**Myth:** Children and youth are trafficked by people they do not know.

**Reality:** People are often trafficked by someone they know, including romantic partners or family members (Polaris Project, n.d.).

## How Children and Youth Are Recruited and Controlled by Perpetrators

There is no single pathway for a child or youth to become ensnared by a human trafficker. Children may be coerced by peers, recruited by traffickers in person or online, abducted, sold, or exploited by family members (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2016). Some perpetrators seek to build trust with children and youth, manipulating them through methods including giving gifts and compliments, normalizing the exploitation, providing drugs or alcohol, or establishing intimate “relationships” with them. Young people may report that they willingly engaged in commercial sex despite the exploitative nature of the relationship. Caseworkers should remember, however, that the law considers this a crime against the child or youth.

### Myth vs. Reality

**Myth:** Human trafficking only happens in illegal or underground industries.

**Reality:** Human trafficking cases have been reported and prosecuted in industries such as restaurants, cleaning services, construction, and factories (Polaris Project, n.d.). Children and youth may even be attending school while experiencing trafficking.

Children and youth may be kept in exploitative situations through physical force or violence (e.g., beatings, rape, imprisonment); psychological manipulation; coercion and intimidation (e.g., fear of violence toward themselves or loved ones); or dependence on the trafficker for housing, money, food, and other basic needs as well as substances to which the child or youth may be addicted (potentially due to the trafficker forcing the person to take them).

Additionally, some young people have or may develop an emotional connection with their traffickers, often called trauma bonding or Stockholm syndrome (Hardy et al., 2013). This trauma bond may cause the victim to support or protect the trafficker, which may make it difficult for child welfare personnel, law enforcement, or other service providers to assist the victim in escaping, receiving services, or prosecuting the perpetrator. In some cases, victims who have been removed from their exploitative situations make attempts to re-establish emotional or physical contact with the perpetrator, going so far as running away from their care setting to be with them (West & Loeffler, 2015).

When child welfare caseworkers are aware of these types of bonds and work with foster families and other care and service providers to address them, they will be better able to ensure that children and youth remain safe in their placements. Caseworkers may also benefit from awareness of the stages a person may go through in the process of making change. Understanding these stages (precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance) and assessing a child with the stages in mind helps caseworkers provide support strategies that match the child's needs.



## **Myth vs. Reality**

**Myth:** Children and youth in trafficking situations want help to escape them.

**Reality:** Self-identification as a trafficking victim happens along a continuum. Fear, isolation, guilt, shame, and misplaced loyalty are among the many factors that may keep a child or youth from identifying as a victim or seeking help (Polaris Project, n.d.).

## **CHILDREN AND YOUTH MISSING FROM FOSTER CARE**

Children who go missing from foster care or experience a runaway episode face an increased risk of experiencing trafficking (Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin, 2014; Reid, 2015). One study found that running from foster care was the most common pathway to experiencing sex trafficking (Reid, 2015), while another found that, of youth who were confirmed or strongly likely to have experienced sex trafficking, 83 percent had at least one runaway episode (Pullmann et al., 2020). Based on the limited analyses available, it is estimated that as many as one in six youth experience sex trafficking victimization during a foster care runaway episode (Latzman & Gibbs, 2020).

Caseworkers should be aware of their agency's protocols regarding steps to take when a child or youth in care runs away or is suspected of running away. Title IV-E requires State child welfare agencies to determine a child's or youth's experiences while missing from care, including screening them to determine if they may have experienced sex trafficking (see section 471(a)(35)(A)(iii) of the Social Security Act). Federal law also requires agencies to have procedures to locate children missing from foster care and determine what the child experienced while away from care. Additionally, agencies are required to have regular communication and provide details when reporting children missing or abducted to law enforcement and NCMEC. This may include, for example, sharing information pertaining to the child's or youth's recovery and circumstances related to the recovery and providing a photo, description of physical features, and endangerment information, such as pregnancy status, prescription medications, or suicidal tendencies.

Risk factors for running away from foster care include escaping from unsafe, overcrowded, and highly restrictive placements (e.g., those with restrictions on phone calls or how youth can spend their free time); meeting with family, friends, and romantic partners; maintaining a connection to their communities of origin; and gaining a sense of independence or normalcy (Latzman & Gibbs, 2020). To help prevent and address youth running away from care, caseworkers should take the time to talk with them and understand their points of view and support the foster parents and residential staff who care for those who have experienced trafficking. They can ensure care providers are aware of children's and youth's unique experiences and needs and know how to react if they suspect a child or youth has run away from care. To learn more, refer to [ACF-IM-22-01](#) ("Responding to Human Trafficking Among Children and Youth in Foster Care and Missing From Foster Care") from the HHS Administration for Children and Families or visit NCMEC's [Children Missing From Care webpage](#).



## UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS OF THOSE WHO EXPERIENCE TRAFFICKING

Children and youth who have experienced commercial sexual or labor exploitation may have needs similar to those who enter the child welfare system because of neglect or abuse. For instance, children and youth who have experienced trafficking need trauma-informed and healing-based health care, mental health services, a safe place to live, help with education, and facilitated reconnections with family members or trusted adults. These are discussed in this section, along with ways that victims of trafficking have needs distinct from other victims of trauma.

**Physical health.** Children and youth who have experienced trafficking often have suffered physical abuse, neglect (including medical and dental neglect), emotional abuse, and sexual abuse (Greenbaum et al., 2023). They may suffer from broken bones and other untreated internal and external injuries; sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV; and malnutrition. Their overall health may show the consequences of long periods of poor or no medical or dental care. Child welfare caseworkers can help by ensuring that victims have access to medical screenings and treatment to address both immediate and long-term concerns. Connecting with a trauma-informed, healing-based health-care provider—and potentially a forensic interviewer from a child advocacy center—who has experience working with victims of trafficking may also provide reassurance to victims who may be reluctant to seek care.

**Behavioral health.** Children and youth who have experienced trafficking often have an array of complex behavioral health needs (Greenbaum et al., 2023). They may have experienced beatings, sexual assault, and other acts of violence. Many people who experience trafficking need long-term, intensive behavioral health services to help them move forward with new, healthier life skills. Studies have identified several behavioral health symptoms associated with trafficking, including posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorders, depression, substance use disorder, and other mental health diagnoses (Greenbaum et al., 2023). Screening by qualified behavioral health providers who have experience working within the realm of antisexual violence support can be the first step to getting help. Screening can help determine the type of therapy that might be most useful, and child welfare workers can facilitate access to treatment providers.

**Out-of-home care setting.** Children and youth who have experienced trafficking and who come into contact with child welfare may need to enter out-of-home care if they cannot return safely to their families. Common challenges to finding stable and safe out-of-home care settings for these children and youth include protecting them against continued contact with traffickers, reducing the risk of runaway behavior, addressing caregiver concerns about inappropriate sexual acting out, and ensuring culturally competent care for children and youth who identify as LGBTQIA2S+ (Gibbs, Feinberg, et al., 2018). Caseworkers should determine the most appropriate and least restrictive out-of-home care setting depending on the unique needs of the child or youth and consider settings in which the caregivers are trained in how to work with children and youth who have experienced trafficking, such as specialized therapeutic foster care, specialized group homes, and traditional therapeutic foster homes (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019a). Some children and youth may need short-term, safe houses to meet their immediate crisis needs during initial intake. The ultimate goal should be for the child or youth to transition into a family-like setting and continue to establish healthy relationships.

**Education.** Children and youth who have experienced trafficking may require educational screening and remedial services (Office of Safe and Supportive Schools, 2021). While some children and youth may feel comfortable in a traditional school, others may prefer more nontraditional education options. Child welfare caseworkers can help by collecting records, exploring education options, and facilitating enrollment.

**Employment.** Youth may also need assistance obtaining safe employment, especially if they lack legal work experience or have not acquired a high school diploma or GED. They also may have been arrested for crimes committed while under a trafficker's control or influence, which could prevent them from passing background checks required for employment. Additionally, those who have experienced sex trafficking may have had the experience of making a large amount of money in a short time and may not view the pay in an entry-level position as a viable option. (Lutnick, 2016). Caseworkers can seek out programs in their communities that connect youth with job training, job skills and application support, internships or externships, or other supports. They can also educate employers on how best to work with youth who have lived through this type of trauma.

**Legal services.** Children and youth who have experienced trafficking need lawyers if they are charged with crimes that result from their victimization. They may also need legal counsel to protect themselves from their "pimps" or traffickers or to establish their legal identity. Some children involved with the justice system may require an attorney for victim advocacy, while those who are not U.S. citizens may require an immigration attorney. It is important for caseworkers to inform themselves about the process for prosecuting trafficking cases in their jurisdiction, as this can be a long and strenuous process for a young person who wants to move forward with healing.

**Other needs.** Children and youth will often need help with basic life skills (e.g., opening a bank account, keeping medical records, getting their mail). For many, having a mentor, sexual violence advocate, or outreach worker who is willing and available to provide guidance over the long term is essential to ensuring that the young person is able to pursue a life away from abuse. In addition, caseworkers should strive to provide culturally sensitive care and consider culturally specific needs a child or youth may have.

## Helping Clients Empower Themselves

The Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) of the U.S. Department of Justice has developed three graphic novels to help young trafficking victims understand what human trafficking is and what their involvement in the child welfare and criminal justice systems might look like. The booklets include information such as how the justice system works, what their rights are, whom they might meet in these systems (for instance, what a caseworker is), and how to cope with the feelings they might have. These resources can be accessed for free on [OVC's website](#).

## **WORKING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUTH WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED TRAFFICKING**

Survivors of human trafficking have experienced a wide range of trauma. They may be hesitant to speak with authorities, provide detailed information about their situations, or even self-identify as victims. (In fact, caseworkers must be mindful of the language they use, as the term "victim" may feel demeaning to those who have experienced sexual or labor exploitation.) To best support children or youth who may have experienced human trafficking, caseworkers should build rapport with them, properly administer and interpret screening instruments, and connect them with services as appropriate.

### **BUILDING RAPPORT**

Caseworkers should utilize the strategies they already employ: using active listening, practicing empathy, being culturally responsive, using interpreters when necessary, being nonjudgmental, maintaining open body language, and mirroring the terms used by the child. There are some approaches, however, that should be emphasized when working with children who have experienced trafficking (Brantley, 2015; FYSB, 2016; Vera Institute of Justice, 2014):

- Ensure the person feels safe and has their basic needs met.
- Avoid using judgmental statements and try to see their perspective to gain understanding and reduce judgmental attitudes.
- Be prepared to build a relationship with the person over multiple meetings before they are ready to divulge details of the exploitation.
- Recognize that many children and youth do not view themselves as victims and understand that they may or may not agree with that label in the future.
- Let the person know if you have experience with similar cases, as appropriate.
- Be sensitive to any fears the person may have about retribution by the trafficker toward them or their family.
- Emphasize that the person is not responsible for the exploitation—recognize that it may take time and space for the person to come to this understanding.
- Be aware that victims often are given a false story to tell authorities and are conditioned not to trust them.
- Do not speak negatively about the trafficker, as the child may still have a complex relationship with them.

Caseworkers can apply these techniques throughout their time with children and youth who have experienced trafficking—or who are vulnerable to victimization—including during intake, screening, investigation, and service provision. Additionally, caseworkers should partner with other organizations and individuals who may already have a trusted relationship with the child or youth, such as drop-in centers, sexual violence advocates, and survivor-led organizations. This may help victims who distrust authority figures to develop a rapport with caseworkers.

Some young people actively avoid contact with the child welfare system, which is a barrier to care. Some have had previous negative experiences with child welfare and do not want to be involved again (Gibbs et al., 2014). Even those with no previous child welfare involvement may view it as a system that will not improve their situations (Lutnick, 2016).

Some victims may have been instructed by their traffickers to avoid the child welfare system or coached on what to say if they encounter system representatives. They may withhold information from child welfare caseworkers or other service providers. Similarly, youth may avoid contact with shelters or other social services so they do not have to provide information that may attract the attention of child welfare systems or law enforcement (Gibbs et al., 2015). This potential avoidance highlights the importance of caseworkers building trust with victims and assuring them they can provide help and support.

Understanding a child's or youth's culture can help caseworkers provide care that best meets their needs. The National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center offers [a variety of online training resources](#), including on the following topics:

- [Providing culturally and linguistically appropriate services](#)
- [Understanding the issues surrounding trafficking and its implications for American Indian and other Indigenous communities in the United States and its Territories](#)

### **Myth vs. Reality**

**Myth:** Children and youth who experience commercial sexual or labor exploitation are physically unable to leave their situations and are locked in or held against their will.

**Reality:** While this is sometimes the case, more often, children and youth in trafficking situations stay for more complicated reasons. For example, some lack basic needs for escape, such as transportation and housing, while others may not understand they are being manipulated (Polaris Project, n.d.).

## Resources for Identifying Victims and Building Relationships

The following resources offer screening tools and tips for building rapport and interviewing victims:

- [Comprehensive Human Trafficking Assessment](#) (National Human Trafficking Resource Center)
- ["Screening Tools for Child Trafficking"](#) (chapter 2 of Building a Child Welfare Response to Child Trafficking Handbook) (Center for the Human Rights for Children and the International Organization for Adolescents)
- [Screening for Human Trafficking: Guidelines for Administering the Trafficking Victim Identification Tool \(TVIT\)](#) (Vera Institute of Justice)

A more comprehensive list of screening tools is available in the Capacity Building Center for States publication [Identifying Minors and Young People Exploited Through Sex Trafficking: A Resource for Child Welfare Agencies](#).

## SCREENING

Child welfare agencies use a variety of tools and assessment approaches to screen for human trafficking and exploitation. According to the ACF Office of Planning, Research, & Evaluation (OPRE), approaches generally fall into five categories: indicator lists, indicator tools, interview tools, tiered protocols, and tailored tools (OPRE, 2022).

**Indicator lists.** An indicator is a behavioral, physical, or situational characteristic that may be associated with those who have experienced trafficking. These possible risk factors can be informally considered when caseworkers are using their professional judgment on next steps. The following are examples of indicators of possible sex and/or labor trafficking (Office on Trafficking in Persons, 2022; NCMEC, 2022; U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2022):

- Is not allowed to speak while alone or seeks another's approval before answering
- Appears to have been coached or scripted about how to speak
- Does not possess identification or is dishonest about identity
- Has tattoos or branding—such as those indicating money—that the child is reluctant to explain or that match those of other youth on your caseload
- Describes inconsistent life events (traumatic experiences can jumble one's timeline of events or the person may feel the need to be dishonest)
- Is not enrolled in school or sleeps during class
- Uses terms related to sex work (e.g., "daddy," "trick," "the life")
- Possesses hotel keys, large amounts of money, secret cell phones or apps, or multiple cell phone numbers
- Has secret online profiles or references online escort ads or dating websites and apps

- Describes multiple unexplained "parties" or trips to other cities or States
- Lives where they work or is transported between home and the workplace by guards, vans, or contractors
- Is paid little or nothing for work or services provided
- Is not in control of their money or has no financial records or bank account
- Works long hours
- Mentions that pay goes toward a debt to their employer, fees for travel, or housing provided by their employer
- Is a foreign national minor who reports prior concerns of forced labor or commercial sex in their home country or who reports coming to the United States to work and pay off debts

Note that just one of these on its own does not constitute a human trafficking indicator. For a more complete set of indicators, see [Child Sex Trafficking Overview](#) by NCMEC.

**Indicator tools.** An indicator tool is a more structured approach for reviewing the behavioral, physical, and situational characteristics that may be associated with trafficking victimization. (For a list of sample tools, see [appendix C](#) of *National Advisory Committee on the Sex Trafficking of Children and Youth in the United States Best Practices and Recommendations for States*.) Rather than simply considering the indicators, indicator tools allow caseworkers to document the presence or absence of each indicator and then provide guidance for next steps based on the results. That being said, caseworkers should remember that all youth should be supported and that an indicator tool should not be the key to getting a youth to "disclose" their experiences with trafficking and exploitation.

**Interview tools.** An interview tool is a set of questions that assess the presence or absence of experiences consistent with trafficking victimization. This approach allows children and youth to disclose information directly and, in some cases, provide details. Many screening tools exist to help caseworkers and other professionals determine whether a child has experienced human trafficking. Screening tools may be standalone and specific to human trafficking (sex, labor, or both), or they may be universal or broader tools that have questions related to trafficking.

**Tiered protocols.** Tiered protocols combine a brief indicator tool with a more in-depth screener, which can be used when circumstances warrant it.

**Tailored tools.** Tailored screening tools are used in specific situations, such as at the time of a child protective services investigation, when a child or youth enters foster care, or when a child or youth returns or is recovered from a runaway episode.

The OPRE report [Screening for Human Trafficking in Child Welfare Settings: Tools in Use](#) offers additional details about each of these screening approaches as well as sample tools related to each of the approaches.

## CONNECTING VICTIMS TO SERVICES

After determining whether a child or youth has experienced exploitation, it is imperative for caseworkers to connect them with services that can meet their complex needs. Some agencies have employed recovery services teams that work with survivors. These teams use trauma-informed, person-centered engagement to help young people break ties with their traffickers and begin building a foundation for healthy, caring relationships (NCMEC, 2021b).

Recovery service teams offer the following services:

- Provide case-based assistance in the development of trauma-informed and person-centered recovery plans
- Connect child welfare professionals to local and national resources that provide specialized services
- Share promising practices, resources, and support on meaningful child and youth engagement, effective approaches to a trauma-informed response, safety planning, and strategies to reduce the risk of minors running away
- Provide training and assist with protocol development
- Support multidisciplinary efforts to prevent revictimization

To learn more about these teams, see NCMEC's [Child Sex Trafficking: Recovery Services Team \(RST\)](#).

Caseworkers can also seek services and supports within their agencies and communities that can meet this population's short- and long-term needs. Two obstacles facing caseworkers, however, are limited research-based evidence about how to serve this population and the lack of effective and available services (Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 2013; California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare, n.d.; Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2013). Frequently, when services are available in communities, they are not specialized for people who have experienced human trafficking.

When seeking out available resources or working with service providers to establish effective supports, keep the following in mind:

- Many professionals believe that trauma-informed services are critical to successful interventions for those who have experienced trafficking (Hardy et al., 2013). Caseworkers should ensure that service providers use trauma-informed practices and are knowledgeable of issues related to trafficking.
- Children and youth may not agree with service providers on what constitutes their most pressing needs. For example, a provider may view mental health services as the foremost need, but the child may prioritize "survival" needs, such as food, housing, and employment (Lutnick, 2016). Caseworkers can let the child or youth guide their plan while the caseworker supports them.
- Children and youth are more likely to use services when provided in-house (i.e., where the child is placed) or are colocated with other services (Gibbs et al., 2015). This is particularly important because young people may leave a service program if the services they desire are not immediately available (Lutnick, 2016).



- Empower children and youth who have been trafficked to be partners in their case planning. Children who have been trafficked often desire independence or view any restrictions placed on them as reducing freedoms to which they may have become accustomed (West & Loeffler, 2015). They may view these restrictions, including those designed to keep them safe, as punitive and refuse or resist services.

## Human Trafficking Training for Caseworkers

Child welfare professionals may find the following training resources of interest:

- [Capacity Building Center for States](#): Trainings (free registration required) and webinars on a variety of human trafficking topics
- [National Human Trafficking Hotline](#): Trainings on issues related to human trafficking
- [National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center](#) (Office on Trafficking in Persons): Training and technical assistance to inform and enhance the public health response to human trafficking
- [Office on Trafficking in Persons](#): “SOAR (Stop, Observe, and Respond to Human Trafficking) to Health and Wellness training”
- [Trafficking Prevention and Protection Resources for Working With Unaccompanied Children](#) (Office on Trafficking in Persons): Trainings, screening and reporting resources, and prevention information for foreign national and/or unaccompanied minors

## WORKING WITH OTHER SYSTEMS

Preventing, identifying, and responding to human trafficking requires a multidisciplinary and communitywide public health approach. It is beyond the scope of a child welfare agency to serve all the needs of those who have experienced human trafficking. The following are common partners in collaborations addressing the trafficking of children:

- Educators
- Health-care and behavioral health providers
- Nonprofit agencies, foundations, and community members
- Law enforcement
- District attorneys’ offices
- Juvenile justice agencies
- Court personnel and guardians ad litem
- Policymakers
- Survivors of human trafficking with lived experience and expertise
- Nonoffending family members and/or caregivers of survivors

Before collaborating, caseworkers should be familiar with their agency's confidentiality and information-sharing policies. Some jurisdictions have established task forces or other groups to help develop and enhance relationships among staff from multiple agencies and organizations. These teams can help coordinate services for individual cases as well as set up a framework for addressing and preventing trafficking on a communitywide level. The Office for Victims of Crime Training and Technical Assistance Center of the U.S. Department of Justice developed [Human Trafficking Task Force e-Guide](#) to assist agencies in creating and coordinating human trafficking task forces. Jurisdictions also can use multidisciplinary teams during the investigation of maltreatment, including trafficking, and use forensic interviewing techniques to gather information in a legally defensible manner. For more information about forensic interviewing, see Information Gateway's [Forensic Interviewing: A Primer for Child Welfare Professionals](#).

## CONCLUSION

Although the exploitation and trafficking of children and youth is a long-standing problem, human trafficking has recently garnered greater attention from social service providers, law enforcement, and the public. Agencies and communities across the Nation have been developing or enhancing their response to human trafficking, and research on the detrimental effects of trafficking and treatments to address them is growing. Child welfare professionals can play an essential role in identifying children and youth who experience human trafficking and coordinating services that can support them. They can also assist in helping service and care providers better understand victims' experiences and the complex trauma they may face.

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